A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]
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Chapter 33

"Soon Zeltros will no longer be an issue," Grievous told his officers. "My best agent will see to that. With Zeltros out of the Republic's hands, their primary supply line to Onderon will be cut, and any attack towards Togoria will be suicidal, or at the very least, something we will see coming long in advance. This will secure our industrial regions from any further attacks."

"What of Boz Pity and Saleucami?" asked Pors Tonith, his hologram image sipping away at that vile tooth-staining tea he loved so much. "The Republic could attack through Hutt Space at any time."

"They withdrew from those planets after Kashyyyk, didn't they?" asked Mar Tuuk. "They won't be back in the near future, not with their supply lines so mauled."

"This was my conclusion," Grievous told them. "We must turn our attentions to securing other regions now."

"General, I urge you to return to the Sluis Sector," Rame Cartroll said. "This Wilhuff Tarkin is from Eriadu, his attention will be fixed on us so long as we threaten his home system."

"No!" said Helnurath the Stenax, former pirate and current raider extraordinaire. He stood up, his projection reaching a height that rivaled Grievous at his fullest extent. "I have the Republic on the run in the Galactic north! The time has come to sweep away the pitiful garrisons they have left behind as they flee to protect their Senator's precious Core territories!"

Grievous nodded. "Just as according to plan," he said. "Our next goal is to retake Ciutric. I intend to join the Muunilinst pocket with our main holdings. And that is why my agent will succeed in taking Zeltros out of consideration. We can suffer no back doors open."

"The Ciutricenes will be glad to know we're coming back for them," said Ricimer Eemon. "We could lift half a dozen major sieges in the region along the way. Freeing up a few million droids wouldn't hurt."

"There are nearly sixty-eight million battle droids of the infantry class alone trapped in sieges in the area between Muunilinst and Serenno," said Alzar Khwaramenes, who had finally become a flag officer in his own right, in recognition of his achievement in closing the gate on the Republic Navy at Kashyyyk. "And well over one billion organic troops."

"One billion organic troops who would be worse than useless if forced to do anything but defend their own homes," said Mar Tuuk.

The scale of warfare that had engulfed the Galaxy still sometimes took Grievous by surprise. *One billion soldiers,* he thought. *Are there even one billion Kaleesh?* Two generations ago, probably. Today, doubtful. "Ciutric is our objective," said Grievous. "Helnurath, you will continue your periodic raids into the Inner Rim and Core. Tonith, prepare your remaining ships for battle. Tuuk, Kronaak, you will be the ones leading the offensive. Begin staging your forces at Celanon."

The great crab-man, Kronaak, had been silent this entire time, staring at the projected map of the Galaxy. But he nodded in affirmation. "It will be done, General," he said. Grievous knew a warrior with an idea when he saw one, though.

"Something is on your mind, crab-man?" he asked.

"The Hutts, General," said Kronaak, his voice a low rumble. "They are a dagger at our backs, no matter how badly we tear apart the Republic's supply lines."

"Yes, they are." Grievous glared at the green splotch on the projection that split the Confederacy's two most important pockets, the Raxus-Serenno arc and Sluis Van. "They will be dealt with in due time."

"General, I ask that you consult me when that day comes. I know the Hutts better than anyone else here."

"I will do so," said Grievous.

With the agenda for the near future laid out to his finest officers, Grievous moved on to his next, more dreary task. *Civilians,* he thought, already annoyed. But some of the Representatives of Congress had demanded his attention. Rare was it that they ever wanted to see him. Yet again, Grievous's appointment was done via hologram. Before him appeared Corlissi Ludar, representative of Sluis Van and de facto civilian leader of the government, Tyreca Bremack, the stout and aged Agamarian representative who he had no doubt would get along with Komara very well, and Muwat Hatti, the Techno Union's representative, whom he did not know much about.

"What is it?" he asked the three.

"General, we have a problem," said Ludar the serpent.

"I have many problems," said Grievous. "Why will this be any different?"

"Haven't you been watching the news?" asked Bremack, hands on her hips and a scowl on her wrinkled face. "Do you have any idea of what's about to hit you?"

Grievous glared at the three, meaning to speak, but Hatti stepped forward. "General, the Loyalist Senate has just elected Wilhuff Tarkin to the chancellorship. This man is no Mas Amedda. He's a combat veteran and fleet officer."

"A challenge," said Grievous. "Why should I be afraid?"

"Tarkin's one of us," Bremack said. "He's from out where the Republic's law seldom reached. He's fought real battles before this war. He understands the situation far better than anyone on Coruscant."

"My colleagues are correct, General," said Ludar. "Amedda was making things easy for you with his incompetence and inaction. Tarkin will move immediately against you. Do not think you have a free hand anymore."

"I daresay the real war has just begun," remarked Hatti. The Skakoan almost looked eager, though his face was hidden by his pressure suit's mask, his body language told Grievous everything he needed to know. The slight lean forward, the fidgeting of his fingers, this one wanted war, there was no doubt.

"I'm afraid I agree," said Bremack. "As if our people haven't suffered enough. There will be no mercy or pity from Tarkin."

"Which is why we're here to tell you, General, that we are unanimously in support of whatever actions you need to take to bring the Republic to terms," Ludar said. *Now* they had Grievous's interest. "The leaders of the war and the peace parties and I speak for the entire Congress. Tarkin will never stop until we are destroyed or he is removed from power. Ask it of us, and you will have it. We must force Tarkin from office, the same way you forced Amedda from office."

"This is unexpectedly good news," Grievous told them, trying not to cackle. "My engineers are already designing a new class of warship." He paused a moment, before dropping the hammer on them: "I'm going to need one trillion credits."

The three politicians balked as one, but they had gone past the point of no return.

Stepping out of Seaside Serenity's air-conditioned interior to the sticky-wet heat of a summer afternoon in Ibisa was not something Esera enjoyed. She didn't mind the heat, she even liked the heat, but humid heat was something she did not like at all. "People actually live here?" she asked Voyan.

"If you've never known anything else, would it bother you?" he asked her in turn, as they got into his speeder, which the sun had baked into a furnace despite the reflective shade Voyan had over the windscreen.

"That wasn't here yesterday," said Esera.

"I put it out before sunrise," Voyan said.

Her inner Coruscant girl's alarms went off. "You just leave things sitting on your speeder all day? And you think no one's going to take it?"

The lieutenant gave her a tired look. "Captain, that's not how this place works. Every Zeltron knows at least a hundred other Zeltrons, *not* counting the ones in his neighborhood. If some guy stole my sunshade off my speeder, half the city would know by noon and the other half would know by sunset. A Zeltron's reputation is everything."

"And yet, they're so... forward," Esera said, blushing as she remembered the dozen advances made on her that morning by the hotel restaurant staff.

"That's a good thing, in their culture. Hell, that's a good thing in some Human cultures," said Voyan as he drove towards the palace. The early afternoon traffic wasn't as bad, rush hour hadn't yet begun. "Zeltrons are xenophiles for a reason. Every Zeltron is related to every other Zeltron within a fifty kilometers of them. In the days before space travel, men and women who left their tribes and joined others far from home were respected and welcomed. Throw in the pheromones and the empathic abilities, and you've got a civilization that sees lust as an inherent virtue, not a vice."

"You sure know a lot about this place. So, how does it all work?" she asked, blushing as she imagined a scenario that absolutely had nothing to do with her recent visit home. *Damn these pheromones!* "If my, uh, husband was sleeping around with, say, um, my sister, why am I not killing him?"

"Because you'd be sleeping around with his brother. And *his* sister. And the rest of the village." Voyan stared out the speeder, a glazed look in his eyes. "It never ends, Captain. I get exactly how you feel, it's crazy, how can a society work like this? Why would I raise a bunch of children who probably aren't even mine? I sure wouldn't, not where I'm from. But that's the key. Zeltrons don't have just one mother or father. Every man and woman in a community is a father and a mother to every child, regardless of blood. On Zeltros, what is an individual? Nothing. What is the community? Everything."

"Huh." Esera looked out the windows at the locals on the street, milling about on daily business. "I didn't get that sense. They all seem so... carefree and happy. Like there's not a burden in the world on their shoulders."

"Imagine if you knew that no matter what might befall you, you'd always have a place where you belonged and would always be accepted, unconditionally," said Voyan, his voice quieting and his eyes focusing on something distant. "Of course they're happy, Captain. Can you imagine what it's like to be a Zeltron? To *know* that the love others feel for you is real? To *know* your family, your friends, your neighbors, everyone around you will be there for you when you need them?"

I don't have to imagine knowing, thought Esera. Like a Zeltron, she sensed the feelings of others. Right now, she could feel a despondent envy shadowing her lieutenant's heart. What was it that he had said, yesterday? *Just when you think you're in, you learn you never had a chance to begin with?* And what had he said after they'd saved themselves from the black hole? *Friendship is a waste of time?* Voyan's past was beginning to come more into focus, though Esera knew she didn't have all the pieces yet. In the context of the galactic war, one man's struggle with *something* wasn't important. But that one man had become a key part of her efforts to stop that galactic war. If she was going to play a part in the shape of things to come, Esera needed her crew to be at their best. And Voyan was far from at his best right now.

"Lieutenant," she said, "I hope you're not doubting the rest of us on *Encounter*."

"You can't doubt if you never expected anything to begin with, Captain," said Voyan, his voice as cool and calm as ever. *I don't like that answer in the slightest,* thought Esera. But now wasn't the time to focus on her first officer's troubles. Today, she met the monarchs of Zeltros, and somehow, if not get them into the Confederacy, at least pry them out of the Republic. Somehow. Esera had an idea, but it was a long shot.

The royal palace in Ibisa was the anti-Zygerria in its prominence, or lack thereof. The palace was a handful of buildings in what looked like a neatly-maintained park. What surprised Esera was that the decorative-looking gates were wide open, and Zeltrons of every age were relaxing in the shade of trees or swimming in the ponds or chatting with the seemingly-unarmed sentries. Esera was glad she left the magnaguards at the hotel, she would have felt silly turning up with those beastly machines amid the universe's least-secure governmental facility.

"They sure are lax," she remarked, as Voyan pulled the speeder up to the front steps of one of the buildings. Curious Zeltrons looked on, but most weren't bothering to approach.

"Culture, Captain," said Voyan. "Loyalty is a two-way road here. The king and queen expect faithfulness from their subjects who elect them, but in turn, they must serve the people. A part of that service is hosting festivities." He gestured at all the people on the palace grounds. "Things are quiet now, but it'll really heat up at night."

"No wonder they call it Party Planet," said Esera. "They're not afraid of assassins? Or terrorists?"

"Assassination and terrorism? No, Zeltron politics are far more subtle. And they're often decided in the bedroom." The lieutenant rolled his eyes as he brought the speeder to a stop. "Like I said, it never stops. These people have one-track minds."

"You know way too much about this place for a man who swears he hates aliens."

"My current beliefs are the sum of my life experiences, Captain. I was much younger last I was here. Besides... I mostly hate the kind of aliens who rule my home world." They informed one heat-beaten sentry their identity and the purpose of their visit, and the alleged alien hater unhesitatingly handed over his speeder's keys to a valet who drove the machine to an unseen parking garage beneath the park. "Zeltrons are either very good drivers, or they can't drive at all," he told her.

The inside of this palace building was large and airy, and air conditioned, too. Long, tall windows let in shafts of natural light, and filmy, colorful curtains fluttered like streamers in the currents of the building's internal atmosphere. They were escorted to the throne room, which was minimalist compared to the Grand Prince's on Raxus, Esera noted. Two simple seats sat on a slightly raised dais, while long banners that, Esera assumed, represented all the tribal confederations of Zeltros hung from the columns ringing the chamber.

The monarchs of Zeltros were elected together and ruled together as equals, for life. The reigning queen was Oyane, the reigning king was Taru. Oyane was a regal and mature woman, her pink skin showing wrinkles around the corners of her eyes and mouth, and her hair had gone silver. An air of dignity and confidence was about her, but she did not seem distant or detached as some royals were. If Esera had seen her on the street, she might have thought her a commanding but compassionate matriarch of any household. Taru, her partner in rulership, looked nearly twenty years younger. He was only just showing the first signs of middle age, and his eyes burned with a youthful vigor that had not yet gone out. For a Zeltron, he didn't look like anything special, but Esera could sense a keen and discerning mind in him.

"Lady Esera Komara of the Separatist Alliance," announced a palace official, bowing before the monarchs.

"*Confederacy of Independent Systems,*" Voyan hissed under his breath, so quietly Esera barely heard it. She tried not to burst into laughter right there.

"On behalf of my government, thank you for hosting me," said Esera, doing her best Raxian-style curtsy, drilled into her by Lirka and Sirka.

"Ambassadors are always welcome in our halls," said Queen Oyane, "though I hope you have more to say than the last Separatist who was here."

Grievous had mentioned his prior agents on Zeltros had failed. *I bet they just asked the Zeltrons to leave the Republic without even trying to make a case for it,* thought Esera. "I have quite a bit to say, actually, your highness...es," she said.

"There's no need for pleasantries," said King Taru. "If calling us by our names makes you more comfortable, please do so, we won't mind."

Yes, very discerning, thought Esera, glad to be rid of the clumsy honorifics. "Thank you again, Oyane and Taru."

"So, Esera, what can Zeltros do for your government?" Oyan asked.

"It's very simple," said Esera. "We need you to close this planet to the Republic military. You don't need to join us, you don't need to secede, you just must declare the Grand Army is not allowed within your system any more than the Separatist military is."

The king and queen shared a look. "That is tantamount to treason against the Republic, Esera," said Taru. "I hope you have a good reason to ask this of us."

"If you don't, then war will come to Zeltros, sooner or later. And General Grievous will not forget your decision here."

"That sounds like a threat, my dear," Oyane said.

Esera was glad she'd read Grievous's memorandum on the new Chancellor this morning. "Chancellor Tarkin will not be Amedda, and he will not even be Palpatine, paying lip service to the rights the Republic guarantees you. All of Palpatine's dictatorial powers are his, and he *will* use them. Your planet lies on the direct course for Umbara, which is the gateway to the Confederacy's most vital regions. Neither side can ignore you as long as you're accessible."

"And why shouldn't we be accessible to the Republic? We are a loyal member system, after all," said Oyane.

"Because once a Republic army deploys to Zeltros, they're not going to leave," Esera said. "Look at Mandalore, they tried to stay neutral for three years, and what did that get them? A conveniently flimsy coup by the Deathwatch that gave them the perfect excuse to go in and occupy the planet. Do you think Mandalore is ever going to be a sovereign world again while this war goes on? Or even after?"

Truth be told, Esera had no idea if Mandalore was an inside job or not. But as she saw it, the facts all added up far too neatly to lead to a Republic occupation of the planet. It really was almost like someone had *wanted* the Republic to invade.

"A fine point, Esera, a fine point," said Taru, folding his fingers much like Grievous did. "But when given the choice between the Republic and the Separatists occupying our world, the Republic still looks like the better one. Your faction props up horrendous authoritarian regimes like Ado Eemon's on Caramm VI."

"The Republic backed Suribran Tu of Tibrin," said Esera.

"Belo Tusus of Ortala."

"Jerrod Maclain of Brentaal." Zeltron and Human stared each other down for a moment, before Esera spoke again. "We could go back and forth all day, Taru. No one's got clean hands here. There's good and bad people on both sides receiving support from their benefactors."

"Unfortunate, but true," said Oyane. "I accept your reasoning."

"Here's what I want to ask you two: do you really want a Republic occupation of Zeltros when the Republic never lets any planet go if it can help it? This whole war is a result of the Core and Inner Rim refusing to listen to the periphery's grievances and deciding they'd rather smash them into the dirt than make amends. Brentaal, Jabiim, Umbara, Agamar, it keeps happening! Anyone who tries to go their own way is marked for destruction. They never even cared about these places until they stood up for themselves."

"And yet, does your Confederacy not do the same? Count Dooku went to great lengths to keep Onderon under his control rather than accept the wishes of its people," said Taru. "The Confederacy also attacks planets that are perfectly happy being a part of the Republic, such as Christophsis, Toydaria, and Ryloth."

"Ryloth? The planet where tens of thousands are sold into interstellar slavery while its bumbling blue buffoon of a senator grows richer in his Coruscant penthouse?" Esera took a page from Grievous's book and made a dismissive wave. "I will concede both sides support terrible governments, and both sides attack planets that want nothing to do with the other. That's war. Let me ask you two now: *who* started the war?"

Oyane and Taru exchanged another glance. Oyane answered: "The Geonosians did, when they tried to execute that Jedi knight and the Senator from Naboo."

"What were they doing on Geonosis?" asked Esera.

Oyane turned to her king, who did know what: "They were rescuing another Jedi knight who had been captured."

"And what was that Jedi knight doing on Geonosis?" asked Esera.

"He was investigating the creation of a secret army."

"Is that so?" Oyane asked Taru. "I've never heard that."

"It wasn't in any official report," Taru told her.

"That's what we call espionage," said Esera. "And sovereign states have a right to deal with spies as they see fit. Instead of negotiating for his release, the Jedi dispatch themselves to rescue these three, with a secret clone army at their backs- which had been ordered years in advance by, a Jedi! *They* started this war! The Confederacy and the Republic are equal in every way, but for this. We have no order of out-of-touch emotionless zealots proclaiming themselves peacekeepers while they bathe the stars in blood rather than renounce an oath to a failed democracy."

The king and queen looked thoughtful, while Voyan nodded in approval. *You better approve,* Esera thought, *half of what I just said about the Jedi came out of your mouth first!*

"I sense you have very strong feelings about the Jedi," Oyane said.

"They've hurt you, badly," said Taru. "Can we trust your judgment on them?"

"You can," Esera said, taking a deep breath. "I was one of them."

The three other living beings in the throne room had not expected her to say that. "You are one brave young woman," Oyane said, with a slight smile. "A Jedi in the service of Grievous? I can't imagine how you managed that."

"It's been a long road," said Esera. "Oyane, Taru, I know the Jedi better than any of you could. The Jedi Order is compromised. They're nothing but enforcers for the Senate on Coruscant now. They serve no one's interest but Coruscant's. Now that Tarkin is chancellor, do you think he will hesitate to use them against you if you take even one step out of line?"

"My dear, telling the Grand Army of the Republic not to enter our system would be just the step out of line they'd punish us for," said Oyane.

"If they infringe on your rights, we can protect you. Do you think the Republic can do that, if Grievous decides you're too much of a danger to be left alone?" Esera asked them. "I realize this seems contradictory. But your planet has no shield, one star destroyer could lay waste to your civilization. And one star destroyer is about the only force the Republic can mobilize right now, with their supply lines shredded. We didn't lose a single tanker or freighter to enemy action in the Kashyyyk operation. Grievous could have an entire armada in orbit in six hours."

"Right now, that is true. But what about in a month? In three months? A year?" asked Oyane.

"The Confederacy is outnumbered and outgunned," Taru said. "Grievous may have evened the odds at Kashyyyk, but how long will his advantage last? We are in his sights now, but when Chancellor Tarkin straightens out the Republic's situation–which he will, given his military records–we will be in grave danger for having turned out backs on the Republic."

Esera had to borrow the words of her master now, a concept they'd discussed after the fall of Duro. "You put great faith in economic determinism, I see."

"I am a student of military history, my dear," said Taru, giving her a smile. "This is war of attrition. The Republic can take the attrition, the Confederacy cannot. Simple facts, I'm afraid."

"You are not as good a student as you thought, then. Do you know the story of the Huk war?"

"A conflict between the Yam'rii and the Kaleesh, it ended before you were even born, by the looks of you," Oyane said.

"So you *do* listen to me!" said Taru, patting his queen's hand affectionately.

"Grievous was the man who lead them to victory," said Esera. Whether or not she should be telling this to other people, she had no idea, but the point needed to be made. "He went by another name then, but they are one in the same. He started with a band of fugitives, no more than children hiding in the jungle, armed with spears, swords, and slugthrowers, and in a single generation transformed his people into an interstellar power that could strike the Yam'rii on their own planets. It took a Jedi intervention to stop them. By every right, the Yam'rii should have completely subjugated Kalee. They had the money, they had the industry, they had the numbers. And Grievous had them begging for mercy before the Jedi came. Is this the man you're putting faith in economic determinism to defeat?"

Taru was silent, he sank into his throne, and folded his hands. But Oyane leaned forwards.

"You really believe he can win, don't you?" she asked.

"I do," Esera said. She made to speak more, bu the queen raised her hand.

"Your feelings say more than your words ever could, Esera. I know you speak from the heart," said Oyane. "I think we've both said our parts today, and my king and I have other matters to attend to. We will keep what you've said in consideration, and we will summon you when we have more to discuss."

"Thank you," Esera said. "That's all I can ask."

She was quiet as Voyan drove them back to the hotel. "I never would have guessed you believed that much in the General," he finally said.

"Me either," said Esera. "But it's pointless to lie to Zeltrons, I think. Like the Queen said. I spoke from the heart. I guess I learned a little about myself too."

While the Republic's supply situation was not good for the massed armadas that defined the current war, a lone *Venator* had no trouble getting anywhere on its own. *Vigilance* made it from Coruscant to Zeltros in fine time.

"General Kenobi, sensors detect one Separatist destroyer in orbit. *Recusant*-class. She doesn't quite match the known profile of *Encounter*," reported an officer, a man who wasn't a clone. Over the last few months, many clone officers had been replaced by non-clones, who were at last graduating from the rapidly-constructed training academies that had been built in the first year of the war. Most of them on primarily Human worlds, if not all of them. This freed up a lot of elite clone troopers for front line service, but Obi-wan was still getting used to the new diversity aboard his ship. Instead of the same clones everywhere, he now saw men and women of every height, color, build, and personality.

"Any Flight I destroyer that served this long is likely to look different," Obi-wan said. "That's all pre-war data we have on her, who knows what's happened since then."

"Yes, sir, good point, sir," the officer said. "One of her engines has been completely replaced, the paint tones don't match at all. And there's a lot of patched paneling on her outer hull."

"This likely is *Encounter*, then," Obi-wan said.

"Shall we lock our batteries on her?"

"No need to commence hostilities," he said. "If we can foil their diplomatic overtures, they may just leave on their own."

The officer looked confused. "The Seps don't call him the Negotiator for nothing," Commander Cody said, breaking his watchful silence. "If the General had his way, we'd never fire a shot."

"Thank you, Cody," said Obi-wan, giving him a glare.

"You're welcome, General."

Obi-wan got in contact with the relevant authorities on the surface; they rushed to clear him an opening at the Ibisa spaceport and arrange a meeting for him with the monarchs of Zeltros. Amazingly, it took only three hours to cut through the bureaucratic tape, and he soon found himself being cooked in the late afternoon heat of the tropical city. The Zeltrons rushed him to the palace in an airspeeder, apparently reserved for such emergencies.

And so, Obi-wan found himself in the throne room of the monarchs. "Queen Oyane, King Taru," he said with a slight bow. "I am Master Obi-wan Kenobi of the Jedi Order. I apologize for the chaos I've caused, but we only just had word of the Separatist visit here less than a day ago."

"It's quite alright," said the queen. The two of them were bemused, and more than a little tired, but they were doing their best not to show it. "We just spoke with your counterpart this morning. You will be a fitting follow-up to her."

"To speak frankly, your highnesses, I'm not sure what I should even be saying, since I don't know what this Separatist said to you," he spoke. "I can assure you, though, whatever she said, I can disprove."

"That's good," the queen said. "The Separatist's words troubled my king greatly. He's been in a pensive mood ever since."

"It's true," said the king, smiling in apology as his queen gave his hand a squeeze. "I'll make this brief for you, Master Kenobi. We were told that General Grievous wants Zeltros out of consideration. My personal analysis is that he is trying to secure the Confederacy's industrial heart from any further attacks by bottling up the main hyperlanes as far from their core region as possible. Zeltros being one such bottleneck point. In the coming days he is likely to go on the offensive again. As a loyal servant of the Republic, I am obligated to report this."

"That would be a smart thing to do right now, and it fits Grievous's character," said Obi-wan, stroking his beard. "But what did he offer you?"

"In short, our choices are to stay loyal to the Republic and face his wrath, or tell the Republic that it can no longer use our system for military purposes. We were not asked to secede, merely to become neutral," said the Queen.

"That seems like a very bad deal, if you ask me."

"So I thought. But the Separatist made two points that we cannot refute. Firstly, it would only take one ship to bring Zeltros to ruin. We are a peaceful planet, with no strategic resources, we have no shielding, and nothing worth taking. Our economy runs almost entirely on tourism and trade. A single ship could ruin all this. Right now, the Republic has no issue getting single ships anywhere. Here you stand." The queen gestured to him. "But the Separatists can get a fleet to any system they want, if they try. The Republic cannot do this. The Republic cannot defend Zeltros if Grievous attacks. If the Republic attacks Zeltros, should we turn neutral, Grievous can defend us."

For a few moments, Obi-wan thought. "Yes, that's true, for now. It'll be true next week, it'll be true next month. But in a year from now, the situation will be different."

"You took the words our of my mouth, Master Kenobi." The Queen smiled at him, in a way that wasn't just politeness.

Zeltrons, Obi-wan thought, trying not to smile himself. "And how did this Separatist answer?"

"She told us that we had great faith in economic determinism," said the King. "For a moment, I thought she was referring to Jabiimi political theory, but no, she meant it literally. The state with the strongest, most productive economy will always win."

"This does tend to be the case," said Obi-wan. "I won't lie, the Republic is having some production issues at the moment and will for the short-term future. But that won't last forever."

"It won't," the King agreed, his expression growing dark and grim. "But here is the problem. The Republic's enemy is Grievous. And Grievous took a divided, tribal, agrarian people, and together they brought an industrial, space-faring civilization to its knees. Is this a creature who will be defeated by spreadsheets and statistics, Master Kenobi?"

Never had Obi-wan known Grievous to be anything more than a raving madman on a power trip. *Never, until our last meeting,* he thought. Grievous had been completely sane on *Invisible Hand.* He had gone on to humiliate the Republic at Kashyyyk and defeat Master Yoda in combat. The Grievous who emerged after Coruscant was not the same Grievous he had fought so many times before, that was beyond all doubt. The Zeltrons could sense his troubled thoughts.

"Yes, it bothers us too, Master Kenobi," the Queen said, now entirely serious. "The questions I ask of you are these: can we Zeltrons trust Chancellor Tarkin to defend us against the Separatists? Would he defend us tomorrow? Would he defend us in a year? Is Tarkin the man to defeat Grievous?"

"I'm afraid I just don't know Chancellor Tarkin well enough," said Obi-wan, taking the most diplomatic approach. "But I can tell you, from personal experience, he always sees things through to the end."

Both Zeltrons tilted their heads, and looked at each other. "Thank you for your time, Master Kenobi," said the Queen. "That will be all for today. Perhaps we will have you and Lady Komara in attendance at the same time so you can both better argue your points. It's likely you two already know each other, given your shared pasts..."

For a long while, Obi-wan stood silent, staring at the monarchs, as he remembered what Shaak Ti had said to him just a few days ago. *The Force has guided Komara and Grievous to just where they need to be.* And now here Obi-wan was, on Zeltros, and Komara was already present, acting on Grievous's behalf. *There is no such thing as coincidence with the Force,* a wise master had said a long time ago.

"By Lady Komara, you wouldn't happen to mean Esera Komara, would you?" Obi-wan asked, putting a hand over his eyes to ward off the sudden prelude of a headache.

"The very same," said the King. "Yes, you two do know each other, I see... This should very interesting!"

Oh, I just love interesting, Obi-wan thought.

The star destroyer had arrived in orbit just when Esera and Voyan had gotten back to the hotel. She rushed to her suit for a full discussion with Murshida, who was running *Encounter* with a lot of help from the battle droids.

"The Republic cruiser is following us, quite a ways back," Murshida's hologram said.

"Six thousand kilometers back," a droid interjected.

"Yes, that. They have not locked on to us, but their shields are up. For now I think they mean to be peaceable. That could change at any moment."

"Wonderful," Esera said with a sigh. "Have they done anything?"

"They sent a shuttle down to the surface," Murshida said. "We tracked it to the space port, and an airspeeder went straight to the palace minutes later. The Republic's got more sway than you here, Captain!"

"It *is* a Republic world. Any idea who they sent?"

"The droid network is recognizing it as the *Vigilance,*" said Murshida, leaning over to look at a screen. The look on her face caught the Skakoan'sa attention. "You know this ship, Captain?"

"Yeah," said Esera. She sat down on a chair, slumped down. "It's Master Kenobi's ship. Of course he'd turn up here."

"Shall I come down?"

"No, no, not yet." Esera leaned her head on her hand, her arm on the chair's armrest. "Kenobi won't fight unless forced to. I just really don't want to deal with that man. He's a Jedi Council member, Mister Murshida. That means he's one of the most dogmatic and blind of all the Jedi Order. We can talk to him as long as we like, we'll never get through to him."

"I shall prepare the shuttle, then," Murshida said. "I do not want to go back to General Grievous and tell him I lost you to the Jedi."

"Thanks," said Esera, glaring at the old warrior before closing the transmission.

Now what? she thought. *It's one dumb girl's word versus Obi-wan Kenobi, the war hero! The Zeltrons will never listen to me! Grievous will just fly by this planet and blow it back to primeval age now!* The more Esera imagined how this was going to turn out, the more dejected she felt. *I should probably go fill Voyan in on this...*

She didn't find him in his room, though. Oddly enough, the typically reclusive engineer, mechanic, black hole expert, retired amateur speeder racer, and Druckenwellian electrosynth aficionado was in the hotel's bar. *What's he doing down there? He hates fun!*

Esera found him sitting alone, as typical, along one of the walls, in the darkest part of the bar possible. *Of course, mister grumpy is staying out of the light.* She joined him without a word at his little table, waiting for him to acknowledge her. After a long moment filled with annoyed feelings from Voyan, he turned to look at her. "Captain, this isn't someplace you should be," he said.

"Bit early to be drinking, isn't it, lieutenant?" Esera asked, eyeing his glass full of *something*.

"This is not a happy place," Voyan said.

"Oh, come on, you're never happy," Esera said. "And I got news that'll make your mood even worse, Obi-wan Kenobi is here, with an entire star destroyer."

"The Negotiator?" Voyan rolled his eyes. "Just what we needed. Might as well pack up and go back to Raxus right now, we've already failed."

"Nice to know you have that much faith in me, lieutenant," said Esera, giving him the same glare she'd given Murshida. "I take it there's no black hole we can lure his star destroyer to, is there?"

"Nope," said Voyan. "And even if there was, I doubt you'd want to go through with that again, Captain."

"You are really in a mood today, lieutenant!" Esera scowled. "Whatever that is you're drinking, I want some."

"Zeltron air stirs the passions," said Voyan, as he raised his hand to order another drink for Esera. He didn't tell her what it was, but when she tasted hers, Esera's face scrunched up and her tongue tried to turn inside out.

"Good grief," she said, nearly gagging. "What is this stuff?"

"Nothing for schoolgirls with laserswords," muttered Voyan. "I shouldn't even be letting you drink, you're not of legal age on Raxus. Or Coruscant."

"I am on Stalimur! And aren't you forgetting I'm the captain here?"

"I don't think you'd ever let me, Captain,"

For all his willingness to banter with her, Voyan was in a truly bad mood. Well, worse than usual, as he almost always was unhappy about something. The longer he was on Zeltros, though, the darker that mood seemed to get. At times the pair were approached by the cafarels who worked the hotel. Every time a girl approached, Esera would wave her off to Voyan, who would simply shake his head. A shockingly pretty boy tried his luck with both of them, too, but met the same result. Esera was slightly disappointed that Voyan had turned him down. *They would have been cute together,* she thought, before realizing the Zeltron pheromones were turning her brain to mush.

What caught their attention was when the bartender changed the holotank from sports to local news. The entire representative government was meeting tomorrow, for a hearing on the future of Zeltros's relationship with the Republic.

"That's us, it's gotta be," said Esera, pointing at the holotank.

"Maybe it's about us, but we won't be there," Voyan said, frowning at the machine. "It'll be the Negotiator, we won't even be invited."

"Okay, grumpy. But I think I should head back up... tomorrow could be a big day," Esera said, the words coming slowly to her mind. "What about you?"

"I'll call it a night in a bit. I need to check the speeder, I think I left my reading in there."

"Alright, see you in the morning." Hopefully Voyan would get himself back to his room without any trouble.

"What did I tell you, Tano?" Asajj asked, as they watched the setting sun from the hotel suit balcony. "You won't make easier money than this."

"I guess," said the Togruta, leaning against the doorjam, arms crossed, a glum look on her face. "But it doesn't feel right. I mean... this guy we're working for, he's a spice runner. He's not a good person."

"News flash, sweetie, most people in the Galaxy are *not* good people," said Asajj. "I'm surprised you haven't realized that. It's been a year since you left the Order, hasn't it?"

"About, yeah."

"And you haven't learned just how awful the average person out here in the real world is?" Asajj chuckled. "Hopeless. Absolutely hopeless."

"I think you're wrong," Tano said. "I think most people aren't bad."

"The luxury of optimism is reserved for the privileged, in my experience," said Asajj. "Sooner or later, your faith in the goodness of people will be taken advantage of. You better not come crying to me when it is."

"Whatever, you old harpy," grumbled the failed padawan. Asajj narrowed her eyes.

"I'm twenty-four, don't you call me old."

"You're ancient!"

She wouldn't take any more bait. *We might not be enemies anymore. We might even be partners in business. But we're certainly not friends!* thought Asajj.

Suddenly, Tano tensed up. "Did you feel that?" she asked.

Asajj stood very still for a moment, opening herself to the Force. Something brushed against her senses, ever so lightly, but it was fading now. "I felt something," she said.

"It's a presence," said Tano. "One I've felt before. But where? When?" She glanced back to the suite's main door. "And it's not the first time I've felt it either. It's happened a few times now, I get this feeling like someone I've met before is near... and then gone."

Asajj was only half-listening, her eyes were fixed on her datapad. The breaking news on the local bulletins was far more interesting than whatever Tano was rambling about. "Do you think it's got anything to do with the two ships up in orbit?" she asked.

"I heard something about some clanker cruiser up there this morning," Tano said.

"Cruiser? Do the Jedi not do profile recognition studies? That's a destroyer, *Recusant*-class," said Asajj. "And a few hours ago, one of your *Venators* turned up. They're not shooting at each other."

"Really?" Tano slid away from her lurking place, and looked at the datapad for herself. Surprise ran through her in the Force. "That's the *Vigiliance*! That's Master Obi-wan's ship!"

"You have *got* to be kidding," Asajj said with a groan. "Why is *Kenobi* here?"

"He's probably here to stop whatever the clankers are up to," said Tano, a smile finally coming across her face. "They're already scrap, they just don't know it! What's that destroyer called? *Encounter*?"

"Yeah, *Encounter*. And no, I don't know that ship."

"Well, those tinnies just bit off a lot more than they could chew. I wonder what Master Obi-wan is up to... We should contact him!"

"We absolutely should not," Asajj said. "In case you haven't noticed, we're not working for the Republic. We don't need to report to them."

That was the end of that conversation. For a while, as twilight took over the skies, Ventress read through the local news, while Tano watched the Holonet's latest reports on the war. The terrifying battleship *Cataclysm* was on the move again, appearing in this sector and that sector, making the Republic Navy look like a band of incompetents. Asajj knew better than that, she'd learned enough about warfare that the Republic's lack of escort ships and assurance in the safety of its own trade lanes had lead to this. Perhaps the new chancellor, Tarkin, would fix things. *I'd rather live in a galaxy ruled by some spineless politician than by Grievous,* thought Asajj. *More work for people like me, that way!*

Later in the evening, Naka, their Zeltron liaison, made her appearance. "Hello again, girls," she said, after Tano let her in. "Tomorrow's the big day! You want to patrol our route one more time?"

"Yeah, why not," said Asajj.

"Beats sitting around, even if it is sweltering out there," said Tano.

The three descended to the lobby, and then out the back door of the hotel, where all the speeders were parked. Asajj wondered if that white speeder from the other night would still be there; and it was. And there was someone rummaging around in it. "Hey, Naka," she said, nodding to the vehicle. "Want to find out if that Trade Federation thug you knew is really here?"

"Thug? He wasn't a thug, he was harmless. Thugs picked on him. I used to tell him he was the least-scary guy there was-" Naka caught sight of the movement in the Druckenwellian speeder. She stood silently, petrified.

"If he was so harmless, then why are you so afraid of him?" Tano asked, squinting at the speeder.

"We didn't part on good terms..."

The shape that emerged from the speeder was a Human male. A Human male dressed in what was obvious Raxian fashion. Asajj frowned, and caught Ahsoka's eyes; she didn't look pleased either.

"Well, well, well," Asajj said, "looks like we found our first Separatist."

"I'm thinking we should have a word," said Tano. "I'm betting he's the one in charge of that destroyer up there. He probably came down to enjoy the... debauchery of this place."

"Um, maybe we shouldn't," Naka said, her typical bravado wiped away. "Let's just pretend we never saw him-"

"Not in the cards, sweetie," said Asajj, patting the Zeltron girl's cheek.

"Hang back here if you're more comfortable, we'll deal with this slime," Tano said. She was in her element now, a Jedi warrior with a target in her sights. Asajj preferred this Tano to the aimless drifter she'd been dealing with since Kalee, even if it was only *a* step up in tolerability.

The Separatist was about to put the datapad he'd retrieved from his speeder in his jacket pocket, but Asajj yanked it from his hands with the Force. "I thought you went-" the man began to say, as he turned, and then saw the three women. "Who are you?" he asked them.

"Recognize me?" asked Asajj, smirking.

The wheels in the Separatist's head turned. His eyes widened, just a little. "Asajj Ventress," he said. A guarded, anxious feeling emanated from him in the Force, his grey eyes darting between Asajj and Tano. *Not exactly a looker,* Asajj thought. This Human didn't seem much over thirty; when Asajj saw past his finely-cut Raxian clothes, he was as bland as they came. Average height, slender build, a face that she'd forget in a heartbeat if she saw him in a crowd. When she looked at the datapad he'd held, she saw it was filled with technical manuals, archaeological journals, and articles on strange cosmic phenomena. It was difficult to imagine a more dull and uninteresting man. *Harmless, just like Naka said.*

"What's a Separatist like you doing down here?" Tano asked him, arms crossed over her chest, scowl on her face. "This is Republic territory, you know. You're a long way from home."

"I'm well aware-" The Separatist's voice caught in his throat, as he noticed Naka. For a brief moment, Asajj expected a fountain of fear from the small man. Instead, an avalanche of sheer, cold *loathing* exploded through the Force out of him, a contempt and resentment so deep that Asajj nearly took a step back. A disgusted sneer spread across his face. "*You,*" he said.

Naka trembled. "Hey, Miha," she said in a weak and shaking voice. "Been a while, hasn't it?"

The Separatist, Miha, did not dignify Naka with a response. "Ventress, lose this woman immediately, if you know what's best for you. She is a faithless, backstabbing psychopath, worse than even the Jedi. The Jedi at least make no illusion that you are nothing to them, but *this* one? She has a thousand faces and a million masks."

Guilt and shame gushed from Naka, Ventress could see the heartbreak on the Zeltron girl's face as clear as day. But if she was gathering the nerve to say anything, she'd have to wait, because Tano was angry too, now.

"What was that you said about the Jedi?" She stepped forward, hands balled into fists.

"A band of psychopathic sorcerers, that's what I say about the Jedi," said Miha the Separatist.

Asajj couldn't help it, she had to laugh. "Oh, that's beautiful!" she said. "Calm down, Tano, fighting this little man would hardly be fair. I'm more interested in what our friend Naka has done to get you *so* worked up."

"She uses people like tools, and throws them away when she's done, that's all you need to know," said Miha. The sheer hostility he felt at the moment made his presence burn like a fire in the Force, and every bit of it was focused on Naka.

"Miha, no! Please listen to me, I didn't mean-" Naka tried to say, but the Separatist wasn't having it.

"You had your chance!" snapped the Separatist. "I'm not that pathetic, naive boy you played like a pawn all those years ago. I see straight through your mask, now, Zeltron." Without waiting for a retort, he turned back to Asajj. "Ventress, I'd like my datapad back," he said.

"No, I think I'll keep it," said Asajj. "I don't like how you're talking to Naka."

Miha stared at her, as he pushed the impotent seething fury down into his heart, regaining his composure; their heights were almost even. There was nothing he could do to stop her, and he knew it. Asajj was used to people being afraid of her, and to a degree, there was a slight presence of fear in him, in the Force. But a far stronger resolve propped him up. "Very well. But I'll be taking it back before I leave this horrid planet."

"I'd like to see you try," said Asajj.

"Who says you're going anywhere, Separatist?" asked Tano, stepping in front of him as he made to leave. "You're behind Republic lines. And as Republic citizens, we can make a citizen's arrest of you. We'll give the courts a real traitor to put on trial."

"I spit on your Republic," the Separatist said, sending a frosty glare at Tano. "For a hundred years, my people have been held in the thrall by the Hutts, and your Republic sat on Coruscant, doing nothing. Your Jedi sat in their temple, doing nothing. Treason against the Republic is only treason against the wicked and rotten."

"Isn't that a story I've heard before?" said Ventress, faking a yawn, to hide her own reluctant sympathy. Rattatak was one of those distant worlds abandoned to its fate at the hands of criminals, slavers, and warlords, too.

While the man's little speech had shaken Tano, inside, she gave no sign of it outwardly. She grabbed the Separatist by the collar of his jacket. "Tell it to the judge, Seppie," she said. "We're bringing you in."

But the Force had another plan for Miha the Separatist. The hotel door opened, and the unmistakable silhouette of a Nautolan stepped out into the night. "Ladies, ladies!" he said, in his baritone voice. Marko Riberre approached, hands held up. "Let's take a step back, shall we?"

For once, he was not dressed for swimming. The green Nautolan had on a loose-fitting and colorful Ibisa-style suit, the kind the local politicians wore, that allowed the skin to breathe in the humidity but kept the sun off it. Like all Zeltron clothes in this city for men and women alike, his shirt had a neckline that dipped questionably far down his chest. The style was starting to grow in Asajj, though she had a suspicion she only thought that because of those inescapable pheromones in the air.

"Boss!" said Naka, almost jumping out of her boots.

Riberre took the Separatist out of Tano's hands, and brushed off his jacket. "I'm terribly sorry for all this," he said. The Nautolan was huge compared to the Human, much taller and broader. *And greener,* thought Asajj. "You must be the Miha Voyan I've heard so much about. Naka's mentioned you quite a lot over the years! Your name is a byword for stubbornness and unreasonableness, between us, you know."

"I'm flattered, sir," said Miha Voyan the Separatist.

"Oh, my manners! I'm Marko Riberre," said Riberre, shaking the Human's hand. "I'm something of a... businessman. Naka's one of my best drivers."

The Separatist knew *exactly* who Riberre was, Asajj could sense that. Above every other emotion, a feeling of wariness rose. Miha Voyan knew he was in something beyond even deep water, now. His eyes darted to Naka, and then to the hotel. "I'm not surprised," he said. "I suppose she's told you how we used to race, out in the hills?"

"Yes, yes!" Riberre said. "Exciting stuff! I know those roads, I can't imagine taking them at the kinds of speeds you two did."

"We were young and foolish," the Separatist said, his face molded into a mask of perfect calm. *Ironic,* Asajj thought, *for a man who'd just been accusing Naka of wearing a mask...*

"Weren't we all? She's still quite fond of you, you know. But I couldn't help but overhear my two friends accusing you of being a Separatist," said the Nautolan. "Asajj, Ahsoka, is that true?" he asked.

"Check his clothes," Asajj said. "That's a Raxian cut if I ever saw one."

"He's probably with the ship in orbit," said Tano.

"Whatever could the Separatists want on Zeltros?" Riberre asked, an innocent smile on his face. But suspicion ruled his mind now.

"I am a part of a diplomatic mission, sir," said Miha Voyan. Years of combat experience informed Asajj that the tension in the Separatist's body wasn't just stress, he was getting ready to... do something. What exactly, she had no idea. Every time she reached out in the Force to feel his mind, he recoiled. This man knew what Force sensitives were capable of.

Wait just a damn second, thought Asajj. *What was it he said when I took his datapad from him? "I thought you went-"* A tingle ran down her spine. *There's another Force sensitive here. A dark acolyte of Dooku's? A rogue Jedi? Something else?* She slowly circled around to Tano's side.

"We're not the only Force users on this planet, Tano," she whispered.

"What?"

"This Voyan fellow has experience with people like us. I can't get in his mind, not without him noticing," said Asajj. The Separatist and Riberre continued to talk, their words empty and meaningless, but the polite nothings kept the situation from escalating. Poor Naka stood by to the side, looking like she was about to be sick.

"So... we're *not* taking him in," said Tano, with a scowl. "Who knows what crimes this guy has committed..."

"Being a Separatist doesn't make you a criminal," Asajj said, rolling her eyes. The Togruta's obtuse view of the universe never ceased to amaze.

"Well, I'm sorry for all this trouble," Riberre said, clapping the Human on the back, so heartily that he stumbled forwards. "I'll let you get about your night now, Mister Voyan."

"Thank you, sir," said Voyan, now sweating from something other than the humid heat of the night. He almost ran for the hotel door.

The four stood in the parking lot. Riberre crossed his arms. "Naka, will you be able to get yourself together, knowing he's here?" he asked, without looking at her.

"Um, yes, boss," Naka said. The Nautolan turned his head, giving her a flat stare. "No, sir," sighed Naka. "I feel so bad about what happened. I can't stop thinking about it. I really didn't mean-"

"Unacceptable," Riberre said, his voice firm. "I need you at your best tomorrow."

"I'll try, boss."

"Riberre," Asajj said, stepping in to their conversation. "We've got bigger problems. There's another Force user here, this Voyan guy is with them."

Concern came over the Nautolan. "Then what Republic Intelligence said is right. The Jabiimis have a Force-using assassin. *That's* why the Separatists are here."

"Hold on, what do the Jabiimis have to do with this? They're a bunch of mud-caked simpletons, aren't they?" asked Tano. "I mean, that's what my, uh, teacher, used to tell me."

"I facilitate major operations on Jabiim," Riberre said. "Thorne Kraym must have lost his patience. He's not even bothering with putting out a contract on me, he's sending his best weapon." The Nautolan smiled. "I almost feel honored."

"A Force-using assassin, great," said Tano.

"I happen to be an expert on this subject," Asajj said.

"I'm starting to regret letting that man go," Riberre mused, hand on his chin. "He could have been a good source of information. Asajj, do you think you could bag him?"

"What?" Naka gasped. They all ignored her, but for Tano, who gave her a troubled glance.

"I could go right in and grab him," Asajj said. "But it'll cost you."

"No, this place is too high profile... How about ten thousand credits on top of your commission. For both of you. *If* you bring me that Separatist alive."

"Sorry, I don't do kidnapping," Tano said, raising her hands.

"I'm in," said Asajj, shooting the Togruta a smirk. "When do you want him?"

"As soon as possible," said Riberre.

"Deal."

"Wait, what are you going to do to him?" asked Naka.

"Sweetie," said Asajj, "whatever happened between you two back then, it's *long* over. He's got nothing but hate for you now. Can't imagine what you did, it must have been pretty bad." Naka wilted, but stayed silent.

"Don't worry, I only want to ask him some questions. Whether or not anything happens to him depends on his answers," said Riberre, chuckling. He put a finger under her chin and lifted her face up to his. "And don't forget, Naka, you do as *I* say. Your feelings about this are not important. Is that clear?"

The Zeltron girl squirmed, and tried to look away, but the Nautolan didn't let her. "Yeah, boss, that's clear," she said.

"Good," said Riberre. "I'd hate for our partnership to end over something so inconsequential as one small Human."

Author's notes: This chapter had to have the ending rewritten, and that little thread I plucked on ended up unravelling the entire rest of the Zeltros arc. I've spent the last week or so reworking all of it, so far it's shaping up to be a much firmer story. Alas, we lost an Alize scene, and a scene where a Zeltron boy hits on Esera and Voyan at the same time (merely mentioned in the text now). Very fun to write, but they brought nothing to the plot. "Wait, this arc has a plot?" some of you ask. Yes, readers, it does. I take my time to set the stage, but it's there.

Oh, one more thing. I know we've got some Ahsoka "stans" out there (to use a phrase of the youth). They're probably mad that once again I've portrayed her "out of character." I would like to preemptively ask them if that's really true. In this story (so far), Ahsoka is a hot-blooded, quick-tempered, staunch defender of the Republic and the Jedi. Even in season 7 of TCW, Ahsoka rushes off into trouble without a second thought, faithfully defends the Republic and the Jedi to the people they've ignored or even harmed, and eventually ends up fighting the Republic's battles and leading the clones as a private citizen, falling into the same old routine she's always known. Can you blame her? It's the *only* routine she's ever known. But in this new timeline, free from the protecting hand Dave Filoni (the eternal wolfaboo), perhaps Ahsoka will actually grow as a character, in thought and deed? Read and find out...

< Prev | 33. Chapter 33: Party Planet | Next >

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